

Conversation between Gilles Lipovetsky and Stefan Brüggenmann

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If one looks at the practice of the artist Stefan Brüggenmann, one will quickly be aware of the obvious infatuation the Mexican artist has with the commodity market and how it cross-pollinates with contemporary artistic processes. And if there is a thinker that has painstakingly worked on this kind of subject matters in, no doubt, the French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky. For this reason, it was only normal that these two active minds would collide at some point, sitting down to discuss the impossibility of the artist's autonomy, the question of hypermodernity and the aftermath of conceptual art amongst many other topics.

Stefann Brüggenmann (born in Mexico in 1975 and based in London) became interested in the work of Gilles Lipovestky (Paris, 1944) after coming across his sociological writings on aesthetics, fashion, popular culture and the new purposes of consumerism, as read in *L'Empire de l'Ephemere* (1987), *Les Temps Hypermodernes* (2004) and, most recently, *Le Bonheur Paradoxal* (2009). Instant classics of social philosophy that speak of the current state of capitalism, that has propelled individuals to consume in search of personal gratification rather than to play with appearances and social status.

This conversation took place in France, May 2009

**Gilles Lipovetsky:** So, what you really want is to be free.

**Stefan Brüggemann:** The problem is that right now, with all these processes of personalisation and this growing individualism, we have such possibilities of being free that we end up not doing anything with it. We are not going against a movement at the back, or a movement at the front. Society has become so individualistic that is formed by personal platforms and personal rebellions against yourself, not against the society. You have such freedom that anything could happen. There is not one dominant political ideal; everything –ideals, positions, desires– has become extraordinarily fragmented.

**GL:** Yes.

**SB:** And this why I create a silence, a void, in terms of a provocation. But when I say provocation I am basically meaning communication.

**GL:** Of course, you do something so the public reacts.

**SB:** - Yes, or so they absorb it or they think about it or just ignore it. I don't think that provocation per se is that interesting anymore, and it would be very naive to think that you can actually provoke nowadays.

**GL:** So, in a sense, is it awareness of communication what you are looking for?

**SB:** Yes, to communicate, but also raising questions. When people see my work, it's more about what the person is looking at, rather than what the work represents itself. The work makes you think about something, it raises a sense of consciousness, of time, of this time. My interest lies in what way the works make you think.

**GL:** Now that the new link exists between artists and the industry, of fashion and luxury, you have a lot of artists who can work for brands. Are you critical of this? Because that the essence of is hyper-modernity. Are you like that or you feel separated from the industry?

**SB:** That's a good question. I don't think that I isolate myself from the industry but that I create my own industry instead. I really like that idea. For instance, I am working on a project with one of my collectors. He makes hotels and he asked me, "why don't you put one of your pieces in my hotel?" And I said, "if you want me just to install a piece into the lobby, well I can do that, but that wouldn't be a project for me". He asked me to think about it, so I did. And then I was thinking of how a hotel is probably the worst place related to art. If it was the public library of the city, it would be a safe place, or if it were in the parliament... these are places you would want it to be, they are legitimate. So that made me decide that if I was going to do a hotel, I wanted the whole hotel to be a work of

art, and not just placing a sculpture here or there. I wanted the hotel to be a whole conceptual piece. So I have been developing this idea for the last 4 years for this luxurious five star hotel. I decided it would be more about a concept, not something tectonic. It is more about thinking about a hotel in terms of a format rather than a sculpture. And talking about what you say about fashion, I have been associated in the past to this movement of conceptual art that was more a Marxist movement; they were trying to make disappear the object in art. But in my case I have a text piece which says "Thoughts Are Problems" so I am trying to deal with concepts that are very part of this capitalist world. You know, it is the other way around. Like playing with immateriality but within the system of consumption, instead of pretending to be a Warhol kind of artist. This is a post-Warhol kind of thinking, so I use anti-form to talk about capitalism, rather than Marxism.

**GL:** Oh yes.

**SB:** I am very interested in this situation, how these borders collapse. And for example, I don't have a studio, I am not that type of traditional artist.

**GL:** You only work with concepts...

**SB:** Yeah, I work with a computer, a phone, with other architects... You know, I like to be connected to the industry of society today. I am not going get nostalgic and use ceramics. I am using windows and glass, using signs on the street... All those materials that are found in all industrialised cities, like neon lights...

**GL:** So, in this way, you are a hyper-modern artist?

**SB:** I believe that this is why I was interested in your theory, because I feel quite connected with all these ideas of yours. Concerned with the real world and with being part of it. What I am interested in here is not that I am looking towards this hyper-modernity as somebody who is observing - I am active in it. It is my reality and I want to reflect that in a very non-illustrative way. I don't want to take a picture of the phenomenon, but rather be part of it. For example I will never do something with products. It is trying to push that limit of hyper-modernity into that other level so the brand almost disappears, but you are still part of it.

**GL:** But for instance, if Coca Cola asks you to do something, would you keep your distance or would you find the idea interesting?

**SB:** I would consider it as an option. What is happening lately with advertising agencies is that they look at art catalogues and they just copy what artists are doing and they just add the brand logo on it. They are just doing samples,

copying ideas from artists. The look of things... They try to make it look very creative, and I am really interested in that idea. I think, in a way, it is also the context of my work, to look at magazines, to tear out pages, just to frame them. Without adding, in some cases I have taken an image from Google and put it into a standard form computer and just print it and then re-scan it on a really high-quality scanner and then print it on canvas, so it becomes a painting. And I like to go from a high production publicity world where they spend a lot of money on producing then appropriating that and scanning it in a very low resolution and bringing it into painting.

**GL:** A real painting?

**SB:** Well, printing it on a canvas. The result is very unstable; it could be a photo of a painting, or a painting of a photo. My process is that of rapid change of forms, which I think reflects the obsession of our society with speed and the instability that that produces. And I really like using the technology available to achieve that. My work goes deeper than just the obvious notion of technology, but I really use that mentality. I like the question "What is the position of the artist today?". I can do a hotel, I can do a film, I can have a gallery. I like asking "What is an artist today?." It is a question I ask myself everyday. And also to add one thing, I like the type of productions I use as an artist. I always try to

have low costs because I think in recent years artists were very seduced by the amount of money that was around the arts, and they were overproduced.

**GL:** Your production is low cost?

**SB:** Yes, it is.

**GL:** Well, it has a cost, no? But it is not very expensive.

**SB:** That type of production becomes a statement of my work.

**GL:** It's a joke, isn't it? A contradiction. Because it is low cost but the price is very high. It is interesting to see the ambiguity.

**SB:** Yes, but it's also a token of this capitalist world, where you buy cheap and sell expensive, that's the basic equation. And I play that game. But I always try to make the product look seductive, very well finished. I play this capitalist game, making the product desirable. I have recently shown my work "Reverse Mirrors", which obviously consist of mirrors reversed and glued to the wall, so all you can see is its back. For me it means the end of the image, what is behind the image, the negation, very nihilistic. But the result is very seductive as well. It is just a turquoise surface but for me it is also looking at the world from the other side, inside out. But it is a really cheap material, a material you find everywhere.

**GL:** And your hotel?

**SB:** It has been constructed this year. Obviously I want to see the materialisation of it but for me the project is done. The idea is there, so for me the project is finished and it means a big statement in terms of art production. I did some research when I had the project and there are a lot of artists involved in hotels, giving some pieces or ideas, but never as a whole thing. I have given it a name, a design, and the whole existential concept.

**GL:** Can you describe a little bit what your proposal for this hotel is?

**SB:** First of all, the project is called "Hotel Hotel" because I wanted to put it on the edge, like a twisted tautology.

**GL:** So it is basically a non-space?

**SB:** Well, it is a hotel but the theme is the essence of the hotel itself. And I researched which artists have the biggest numbers of poster reproductions and one of them was Edward Hopper. So I started looking at the work of Edward Hopper and I saw that he was very interested in life, how to paint life, or rather, the American life. I wanted to create confusion of sight and what I did was to take all the titles of his paintings and engrave them in all the walls of each room,



instead of hanging works. Decoration as an action is usually about adding, isn't it? I wanted to have it the other way round, the idea of subtracting from the structure on the wall. And I like titles such as 'Monday Morning'.

**GL:** So that's the title of one of the paintings?

**SB:** One painting is called "Monday Morning", another "Women In Bed"... I like the constant existential question. Maybe you are there and you are missing a woman or the woman is there and this activates a whole situation or reflection. I also like the way hotels are like little voids, you lose the notion of time in them. In this society of hyper-modernism, we live in hotels half the time. Or, at least, I do! You are travelling the whole time and hotels become a very significant part of your life. You are always in transit, and I like that issue: the relationship between society and the hotel. That is why I am doing a work that is very existential.

**GL:** Did you also make some decorations in the rooms or only the lobby?

**SB:** Only the name of the hotel, all the designs, all the text and all the engravings on the walls. I hired a lawyer, we did a contract instructing how to install the work and then it could be placed in another hotel so it could become a chain, a format. It could be like a brand, so you could stay in the "Hotel Hotel Acapulco", and then you could stay in the "Hotel Hotel Nebraska". It is always

the same system even if the interiors change. The only thing that will always be the same is that you will find in room number one the title “Monday Morning”, in room number two, “Women in bed”. That’s what I was talking about before: It’s about the immateriality, making it abrupt, but making it pop also, even if not in the obvious way like marketing has been using pop.

**GL:** No pictures, no paintings at all?

**SB:** You are the painting. I wanted to force the system of what you are used to in hotels. Subvert the role of the customer, so he or she becomes the protagonist of the experience.

**GL:** But in your system, paintings may exist?

**SB:** Of course! But in my work there are no typologies, like painting, sculpture... Everything is the same, and everything is different.

**GL:** And then what is your relationship with that? Are you saying that we must deconstruct or to make a conceptualisation of that, or is it possible to have a sort of play with the seduction of the image?

**SB:** That is a good question because obviously, art is something you have to see. So let’s start from that premise. It starts in the eyes, but I like to force the

eye to look in a different way. Sometimes with images I wonder how many more images do we need? Everything is an image. But maybe if you try to hide the image, then you are going to look more, harder. For me it is very important to force...

**GL:** To force the act of seeing so you see more, different things.

**SB:** Exactly. It's like when you turn off the lights and you can't see anything but then, gradually, you start to see shapes of things.

**GL:** Do you think you have any kind of relationship with aestheticism? Because the image is something sort of hedonistic, isn't it? In fact, in some religions they say "now you have to take distance from reality to have a life closer to God". And then I wonder if it is ironic, the words and the images become too much and then we have to make a stop. But then, you can have more images in your mind. I wonder, if we follow this direction, don't we go in a sort of aesthetic way?

**SB:** Probably.

**GL:** It is just a question.

**SB:** No, it is a very good question.

**GL:** Maybe it is something interesting. Like in Protestantism they say no to having images of God, as opposed to Catholicism. And now you say we have too many images, so we have to create something more conceptual...

**SB:** But I always like to play both games. It's never too much image and never too much concept. I like to play with both, and I will call that "Conceptual Pop". I like this idea mixing vulgarity and elegance.

**GL:** Pop art was not aesthetic.

**SB:** I think Pop was an aesthetic in itself. But I kind of like to have the two worlds together.

**GL:** Are you saying you would like to do something that mixes Pop and Conceptual art?

**SB:** This conflict, on the one hand, is Marxist conceptualism and, on the other, the vulgarity of Pop, is very relevant in contemporary society. There is intelligence, there is technology, there is theory, and then there is also consumerism. You need to seduce anyway, everything has a campaign behind it. But I think that conceptualising can also be very seductive, we shouldn't underestimate society. You know, you are not just selling Coca Cola. There it is

always a bit of everything. And selling something doesn't immediately turn it in something worse. That idea is passé for me.

**GL:** And what is the place of the importance of pleasure in your way of seeing art, in what you produce? Because in the beginning you told me you work is a way to pose questions and also a way to see the world, but you have never mentioned the concept of pleasure. Is pleasure not really the point for you and your audience?

**SB:** I think that pleasure is always manipulated. When you talk about pleasure, when you try and give pleasure to somebody else, you enter a system of manipulation. So obviously I want to seduce because I am communicating. It's like when a collector buys a work, it is an act of communication, an exchange.

**GL:** So your aim is not the pleasure of people, but communication?

**SB:** Exactly. It is not my main concern. Everyone has his or her own means of achieving pleasure. I think lots of people, when they see my work and they buy it, they find a little pleasure in it, maybe for different reasons. But yes, I think pleasure is always manipulated by the system.

**GL:** Yes, but you are not against the system, right?

**SB:** No, I am not against the system at all. Actually I think that I reflect the system very well. I like to play with it, force it to the limits, like stepping on the accelerator pedal of a car to see how far it goes. This idea of the hotel, the hyper-modernity, the development... I belong to society. And that is what really interests me at the end: society. Because I don't want to feel like I am an isolated artist in the mountains, daydreaming. I try to have my feet on the ground of society.

**GL:** As you know, pop artists have made a lot of work with the TV image and comics and also advertising. What is your relationship with this kind of, for instance, advertising?

**SB:** The way I look at advertising it's related to the concept of speed and simplicity. My work is very frontal, even if it can have this very nihilistic and negation concepts it is very frontal and straightforward, because I really believe that in this society you do not have any time to waste. Everything has to be transmitted so fast that, by the time you receive the message, it's already gone. The kind of feeling that you only have five seconds to look at something, and then off to the next thing, and the next. It's like how computers are programmed, like Windows: you have one window and then another and then another. Or like a city, you are always travelling, experiencing it very fast. And in my work, my ideas are always very simple. Even if they do not have that content of

commission, like to sell a product or to make people by stock, but it has a system like that of hyper-modernist society. I work in those terms.

**GL:** If you had utopia, all the possibilities to realise what you want, what would you like to realise?

**SB:** I can tell you one: If we had to send something out of this world to space and it would be just one thing representing how society is today, I would love it if it was one of my works, that would be a dream.

**GL:** But my question is more about if you could produce just one work, make a film, or construct a city... but maybe for you it is not a question.

**SB:** I am actually developing a film. It is more a drama, playing the game of the drama genre. Basically, at the end of the day, I am doing what I want to do!

**GL:** You have no real limits to realise what you want?

**SB:** Limits are part of the system, like the economical situation. So yes, there are always some limits, but you always find ways to avoid the limits. It's your duty as an artist.

**GL:** You don't feel really contained or stopped by the system?

**SB:** Not really. Because you invent yourself, you always find another way. That is part of the process of thinking. When everything is resolved, it becomes boring. So you are a player in the society, and the rules can change all the time and you always try to find your position there. I think the only thing that could stop me is if my brain stopped. I always think to myself that I can do work on a piece of paper or I can spend 50 million dollars on a project. For me it's the same thing. The value of the work is equal. I like to work at all scales. I can do a hotel or I can just do something on my computer and for me the two have equal value.

**GL:** Imagine now that Louis Vuitton asks you to create some bags, a collection, would you say "yes it is a challenge, it is interesting", or would you say "not for me it is not a challenge".

**SB:** I would definitely consider it. Obviously it is a challenge, and I would enjoy that challenge. Actually if you were Louis Vuitton, I would tell you that I would like to do a bag by turning it inside out. That would be my fast, simple idea, instead of showing the exterior I would turn it inside out to show what's behind it. It is fast, and it follows this methodology of my work, that involves fast thinking and that, I think, reflects society. It would make you think "I am going to buy that bag – it is inside out". And you see, it has the methodology of my work,



the twist, to see society as something twisted. To twist the world, to see it from other angles, and that makes you think about what society means.

**GL:** And you love the idea of the fast, of speed, so there is a very narrow relationship with fashion, the way I see it. Fashion is quick, it changes the whole time. What is your relation with fashion?

**SB:** I used to have a very good friend, Isabella Blow, and she was a fashion visionary. I really liked her quickness, whatever you were thinking, it was already too late for her. Obviously, my game is in the field of art, but I apply certain things of fashion in the way that you have to be very direct, frontal, quick, and then leave. And I think it is a way of communicating today and that is what I am interested in. Also, the problem with fashion is that there is no memory. Well... yes and no.

**GL:** Yes I understand you, you are right, but now it is more complex. You play with memory in fashion, but you are right.

**SB:** And with art, art has another timing. Art is in and out all the time. Some things are in fashion, then disappear and come back again. In art, the only judge is time, it is not the consumer, is history. But in fashion, the present time is always the judge of what works and what doesn't. But it is definitely a world that I like.

**GL:** The clothes have never been something you introduce in your work...

**SB:** - When I talk about fashion, it does not mean that I would like to use a coat and print a text on it and then show it. But I observe how the mechanism is and then I apply it to my own work. You see what I mean, that it is not illustrational?

**GL:** Maybe you could take the question or the concept of fashion to construct, to look...

**SB:** Basically when I tear pages from magazines...

**GL:** Oh yes...

**SB:** They are always fashion shots – fashion campaigns, models, seduction... this desirable lifestyle. And I like the fact that I work even quicker than them, that I only have to go to a magazine shop and buy it and tear it and that's it. And they are always very expensive productions, and with my intervention I am reversing the process. I tear it out, I write, I scan and print...And the result is very unstable. It is not clear, and I like that.

**GL:** Do you think you have a political aim or not at all?

**SB:** I have a text piece that says "To be political, it has to look nice". So I don't want to see my art as actively being political, even if it can be political at the

end. But it is definitely not an art of protest, it's more a means of communication.

**GL:** In what sense do you say it is political?

**SB:** In the sense that it is almost impossible to not be political somehow. It is not a conscious decision of being political, but rather that it is almost impossible to not be political. There will always be a political side, whatever decision you take. So it is not an obvious direction, but it is something you cannot escape, you always have a position even if it is constantly shifting. That's what I talk with people of my age, that there are no ideals anymore. The only thing that really connects us is money, it is a symbol that we understand equally and now it is also in crisis. So it is very interesting how these works are political, because it is quite impossible to assume.

**GL:** We talked about Pop art before and you said that you are Post-conceptual. But in what sense are you Post-conceptual?

**SB:** Conceptual art has always been very linked with Marxism. And Marxist theory is not in my system of beliefs.

**GL:** But in your works, what is different to the conceptual movement? Apart from the question of ideology, is it the same?

**SB:** I think lots of conceptual artists of that generation were more interested just in art for art's sake. In the question of "what is the object of art", which is a very aesthetical and self-referential scenario. For me, the question is rather "what is art in the world?". How I produce my art, how I am part of this society. Visually it can look very simple and similar to conceptualism. But the mechanism is not the same. For instance, visually I can be very superficial, very pop in a conceptual style. You see the contradiction, the text is black letters but the content of it can be very much linked with the world, to publicity, to fast, quick thinking. I always like the fact that my work, like the "Text Pieces" could be understood both by the intellectuals and by my grandmother. You don't need this whole background to understand the work. I like simplicity. One of my interests was to commission a book about my work, and I didn't want a text that looked at my work with 'art criticism' eyes. But more related to this thinking of hyper-modernity, and you are somebody who has really dipped into that. You are someone who has been working on these types of observations, investigations...

**GL:** Your art is a way to think of the word, isn't it?

**SB:** Exactly. And this hyper-modernism theory... I feel it really relates my work, in a strange way. Maybe you have another image yourself... What is interesting here is communication, and how you adopt or how you relate, for example, your vision of hypermodernity with mine.

**GL:** Why do you choose neon as a material for some of your pieces?

**SB:** I think it is a material that attracts attention, it is a vulgar material used for shop signs, corner shops and I like to translate this vulgarity and ordinary use into a gallery or a museum and then translating it into a more conceptual or existential work but by using this material to attract your attention for three seconds. And I also like this vulnerability of the piece, that it can break at any moment - it can be turned off. And also that it can be repaired.

**GL:** So you chose to use neon often?

**SB:** What I use often is language. It can materialize it with neon, vinyl lettering...

**GL:** Is it a way to seduce?

**SB:** Seducing is not my concern. I find black and white very seductive. Seduction is something completely subjective. Imagine you are in Las Vegas, what would happen if one of all the hotel light's were turned off? You would look at it and because it is turned off you could find it to be very beautiful. I use the mechanism of seduction by trying to be as simple as possible.

**GL:** You want to create a sort of minimal seduction then, no?

**SB:** Yes, like it could be the absence that creates the desire. You can be very kitsch, and that can attract or not, or you can be very simple and minimal and that can attract or not. It depends on the viewer.

**GL:** You want to seduce but with minimal means. You don't reject...

**SB:** Actually, what I like is to put in conflict two elements: the conceptual element and the visual. I put them together to create tension and, for me, that is what creates the pleasure.

**GL:** So you accept the contradiction?

**SB:** Yes, that is an important element of creating an existential work, I guess... I want people to wonder, "is this a painting, is this a photograph, what is it?". That's very important. Neon was used in the seventies but I am using them now for certain and different reasons, and I like the fact that it can look conceptual but it's addressing something completely different. I like to put everything that is existential and vibrant into a crisis. I like to work with ideas that are not already a conclusion.

**GL:** That is probably a hyper-modern statue of art.

**SB:** Exactly. It's like with neon lights, I love the fact that they are blinking the whole time. You never know when the neon will break, when it will turn off. The fastness... You never know when you will have to change.

**GL:** And why do you like that?

**SB:** Because I think it is part of my reality, part of what I live every day, or how I think society is working. For example, you never know if the money in the bank is going to be there, it is like a problem, like a real situation today. You are born with this idea that the dollar is a symbol of... and now it is not even that... now it is changing you feel this instability.

**GL:** Do you participate in any kind of movement?

**SB:** Yes, I participate.

**GL:** In Mexico, or in the world?

**SB:** I have shows in the world.

**GL:** Do you have some artist friends with whom you create a sort of group?

**SB:** No, no. And that is a problem.

**GL:** Would you like to?

**SB:** Sometimes I think I would like to, yes. But the situation now is so extremely individualistic. You connect in certain ways but everyone has their own revolution in their head. I think the beauty of it is that it is so individualistic that it creates a lot of voices. But I can imagine that with the passing of time, you could build a group.

**GL:** At the beginning of the century until the sixties or even the seventies there were always a lot of groups of the artists of the avant-garde. That was modernity. But in hyper-modernity...

**SB:** - It is not like I have a group of friends all fighting for the same thing, and that has its good and bad moments. It is the contemporary condition, you articulate your own meaning all the time, the process of personalisation. All the time you are fighting against a very individualistic society... In fact it becomes so individualistic that sometimes you could just disappear. But that is the challenge, what keeps you thinking and going. I feel this is the condition we live in. I am not saying it is good or bad. It is just the condition.